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ABSTRACT

A study in two countries investigated college students' conceptions of "academic literacy," defined as the system of information exchange or mastery of the elements of such a system. Subjects were nine students, four at Ohio State University, a long-established "mega-university," and five at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, a small, newly-established university (Barcelona, Spain). Data were gathered through student reading logs, weekly interviews, examination of tests, papers, and exercises, and analyses of assigned readings. It was found that in both contexts, students were engaged in an information processing "game," a rule-governed activity, consisting of information retrieval, manipulation, processing, and display. These activities are largely driven by the assessment process. The game's demands for information processing and display clashed with the students' self-imposed curriculums, creating dissatisfaction for them. The more academically successful the student, the more clearly he appeared to be able to articulate the differences between the game and his perceived learning. All expressed interest in learning. However, student behavior differed in the two contexts in approaches to written language and in the nature of the self-imposed curriculum. Contains 23 references. Some interview excerpts in Catalan are appended. (MSE)

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Academic Literacy on Two Continents: The Role of Community Norms

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Academic Literacy on Two Continents: The Role of Community Norms

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s Cazden (1988) observed with regret that most studies of literacy have implicitly or explicitly assumed the teacher's, institution's, or society's perspective. In this way, students have been typically seen in terms of their varying responses to various pedagogical treatments, their association with demographic, linguistic, or psychometric characteristics, or the outcomes they exhibit under specific environmental, curricular, or social conditions. Their subjective viewpoint as stake holders in schooling was rarely taken into account. In fact, this observation could be seen as part of a broader movement that had begun to gather strength a number of years before. Cazden's book was one of a number of studies of literacy that have attempted to capture the students' perspective typically through qualitative research methodologies (e.g. Gumperz, 1981; Heath, 1982, 1983; Fishman, 1991; Camitta, 1993; Dahl & Freppon, 1995).

While this recognition of the importance of students' subjective views has had dramatic impact on literacy, it has had relatively little influence on studies in higher education. In a way, this absence is as surprising as it is troubling. For one thing, college students play the role of subjects in much of the research that goes on on college campuses. After all, much of what we know about language and cognition has been through responses of undergraduate subjects. For another, there would seem to be a good deal of interest in the topic among researchers. After all, term after term, it is common to hear faculty members, in their capacity as instructors, engaging in informal discussions about the way students manipulate information, prepare for exams, choose their readings, organize their time and evaluate their classes. Finally, college students are, because of their greater maturity and longer years of experience in the role of student, ideal expert informants on how literacy is played out and acquired in academic settings. Yet, the efforts made to exploit this resource have been relatively isolated and

sporadic. Even in new institutions, the frequent institutional efforts at self-examination have not led to in-depth analyses of college students' ways with words.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our aim in the present study was precisely to cover this gap and we set out to explore how college students constructed academic literacy. Researchers who have asked students to reflect on what they do in college (e.g. Moffett, 1989, Chiseri-Strater, 1991, Geisler 1994) have found responses of considerable eloquence and insight, therefore, we devised the present study in a similar way. We have also added a cross-cultural dimension that, while missing in these studies, has frequently been profitably employed in a number of core studies on literacy at earlier stages of schooling (Heath, 1982, 1983, Cazden, 1988, Fishman, 1991, Dahl & Freppon, 1995). Our study differs from previous work in that we explicitly define academic literacy as the socially governed system or systems of language-driven information exchange and manipulation used in academic contexts. Because this definition is original to this study, it would appear worth making a short excursus to justify it.

Traditionally, the notion of literacy has been tied to varying extents to the etymological meaning of the word, namely, relating it in some way to written language. Nevertheless, quite apart from the theoretical work (e.g. Comaroff, 1975, Scribner & Cole, 1981, Street, 1984, 1993, Tannen, 1985, Chafe & Danielewiscz, 1987) that has called into question the exclusive focus on the technologies of the alphabet, the word itself seems to be spontaneously taking on a broader meaning in common usage. Thus, computer literacy, cultural literacy, historical literacy, as well as those new coinages that use the *-acy* suffix--such as oracy and numeracy--do not refer primarily to the presence or use of print. By the same token, it became apparent quite early in our study that to isolate or emphasize the role of print in what we observed in academics would create an artificial construct. Although a lecture, for example, may involve the use notes on the part of the student and/or the teacher, the role of those notes is not central to what happens in that lecture.

Thus, we have adopted here what we feel is the distillation of the emerging sense of the term literacy (and the associated -acy suffix). In all the cases above, the term or suffix refers to a system of information exchange or mastery of the elements of such a system. This new definition leads us to a number of advantages--particularly considering our background as applied linguists--because it joins the construct of academic literacy to previous studies of social systems of communication. As is true for these systems (Bartsch, 1987), academic literacy appears to be organized largely through norms. In other words, the details of interaction, the significance of information, and the responses of the participants develop into expectations of regularities enforced by moral pressure. This pervasive normativity explains the advantages of comparative approaches. Universities and schools as institutions and teachers and students as individuals are embedded in cultures, and as Bartsch (1987) points out, cultures are constituted by their norms. Thus, the shifts between cultures used in literacy studies reveal patterns of interaction and expectation in schooling as a culturally-situated phenomenon, and, in this way, they ameliorate the ethnocentric perceptions that norm-based phenomena tend to produce.

THE CASE STUDY

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to explore how academic literacy was constructed by students in two universities embedded in different countries. As in many of the literacy studies cited above, we used qualitative case-study methodologies to capture students' perspectives on academic processes. In our case, these methods included having respondents keep reading logs, interviewing respondents weekly, examining artifacts such as tests, papers and exercises, and doing close analyses of students' assigned readings. Both researchers were faculty members at the respective sites and, as such, were also able to engage in participant observation. We chose a small number of participants from the two sites as the best way to discover and start describing patterns of behavior, to understand those patterns from the

students' perspective, and to generate hypotheses and questions for future research (Erickson, 1982, Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, Gilmore & Glatthorn, 1982, Spindler, 1982)

One site, the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain, is a small university of recent creation. The languages of instruction at the UPF are primarily Catalan and Spanish, and the students who participated in the study were, like most of their cohorts, Catalan-dominant bilinguals. The other site was The Ohio State University in the US, a long-established "mega-university." OSU, of course, uses English as its instructional medium, and the students who participated in the study were, as is also typical of their classmates, English speakers. All, in fact, were monolingual, except one who was proficient in German, which he had learned as a second language. Both universities are public state-supported institutions and their undergraduates come from a range of socioeconomic origins in their respective geographic, cultural, and linguistic regions.

There were a number of differences in the research conducted at the two sites that need to be acknowledged now and addressed, if possible, in future research. In Barcelona, for instance, students were interviewed in focus groups while in Ohio the interviews were individual (see Table 1). Also, the Ohio students were Social Science majors whereas those in Barcelona were studying for a degree in Humanities. Finally, the Ohio students were also slightly more advanced in their academic careers. Readers should also be aware of certain structural differences between the two institutions. First, as can be seen in Table 1, the grade point averages are not comparable across sites, but only within them. Lluis, for example, is a more successful student than an American might suppose from the numbers. He had two *Matrícules d'Honor*, a grade that most Spanish students do not achieve even once during their academic careers. At the same time, a *Suspès*, which is a failing grade triggering repetition of the course, is hardly unusual in Spain, so much so that all the participants except Lluis received at least one over the year they participated in the study.

Table 1 Students at both research sites

AMERICAN PARTICIPANTS				CATALAN PARTICIPANTS			
Name	*Year*	*Major*	*GPA*	*Name*	*Year*	*Degree*	*GPA*[1]
Greg	5	Sociology/German	A	Lluis (m)[2]	1	Humanities	2.3 (*Notable*)
Carmin	3	Social Work	A-	Gemma (f)	1	Humanities	1.4 (*Aprovat*)
Sophie	3	Social Work	B-	Jaume (m)	1	Humanities	1.4 (*Aprovat*)
Will	2	Psychology	B-	Francesc (m)	1[3]	Humanities	1.2 (*Aprovat*)
				Pilar (f)	1	Humanities	0.7 (*Suspes*)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 'Game'

The most basic finding is that, in terms of their course work, respondents at both sites were engaged in what was essentially an information processing game. The notion of 'game' has a number of advantages. It captures the sense of competition, interaction and guesswork involved in what these college students did with information. Furthermore, it depicts the institutionalized aspects of academic literacy as a rule-governed activity in which different strategies are employed by individuals playing specifically defined roles. However, the use of the game metaphor should not be seen as implying that this research trivializes what students do with their academic subject matter. Nor, for that matter, does it imply that learning does not take place in courses; in fact, the students we interviewed showed a great deal of concern with

[1] Here we have used a scale of 0 to 4 and given the following numerical values to the Catalan grades: *Matricula d'Honor* (4), *Excel·lent* (3), *Notable* (2), *Aprovat* (1), and *Suspes* (0). The usual grading system in Catalonia is as follows: On a scale of 10, *Matricula d'Honor* (an *Excel·lent* with honors), *Excel·lent* (above 8.5), *Notable* (7-8.4), *Aprovat* or Pass (5-6.9), *Suspes* or Fail (below 5). The following formula has been applied: GPA = Grade value * number of credits for each course / total number of credits per year.

[2] (m) stands for 'male student' and (f) for 'female student.'

[3] This was Francesc's second year in college but his first at the School of Humanities after changing majors.

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their learning. It is simply a useful, conceptual tool that clarifies what institutionalized academic processes look like from the student's perspective.

This game consists of an interactive activity of information retrieval, manipulation, processing, and display. Information displays, which consist of papers, exams, exercises, and oral presentations, are evaluated quantitatively and, at least potentially, qualitatively. The process of evaluation drives the entire activity because it forms the objective of the game. Importantly, it also consists of an information feedback loop because it informs student players of their standing, and it also typically provides some data on how to improve performance.

One interesting facet of the game is that the instructor can be seen, not unlike the dungeon master in *Dungeons & Dragons*, as a kind of player with a specific management role. Thus, besides evaluating displays, the instructor typically has the important responsibility of setting out rules that govern the details of the particular instantiation of the game realized in each course. These course-specific rules are laid out explicitly in written form on the syllabus (e.g. the percentage of the final grade derived from different displays) and in oral form in classes (e.g. how papers should be organized, what types of question are liable to appear on exams). The game-like aspect, as in *Dungeons & Dragons*, comes, in part, from the partial nature of the criteria supplied by the instructor. Some details of the scoring criteria, such as the actual questions, are not typically made explicit but have to be guessed by students. For example, a teacher does not usually tell students exactly which pieces of information will be most highly evaluated in a paper or a test. Students are required to figure it out. Instructors are also likely to leave the type of information expected--such as concepts, facts and procedural displays (see Newman & Mescher, 1996)--in some doubt. Also as in *Dungeons & Dragons*, the instructor has a limited role in providing information to be used in displays, as well as pointing the way to other information in addition to providing themes and setting a general ambiance.

Whatever their origin and the degree to which they are made explicit, the rules, the location of information, the type of information expected, and the criteria for scoring that constitute elements of the game are developed within a set of over-all parameters that define what constitutes a valid game. These parameters can be normative, as when a student and

instructor determine what is valid to ask on a test, or they can be laid out officially, as when plagiarism is defined in a code of conduct. As an end result, the instructor and student arrive at a partially implicit and partially explicit contract as to how displays and their evaluations will be conducted, as well as to what counts as legitimate ways for achieving them. When students believe that this contract is violated, they feel they have the right to complain that the assessment system or the workload is unfair. As an example of the last type of issue, the Catalan students frequently complained about classes called *Practiques*, which were devoted to working in small groups on writing skills in their native languages--Catalan and Spanish--and to writing and grammar practice in the two compulsory foreign language classes. These *Practiques* took considerable time, but had little or no direct impact on their grades. One of the Catalan students put her feelings this way:

Excerpt 1[4]

GEMMA: The practice work works really well, and it is really good, but I always have in the back of head the idea that there's something else and that's the test. You don't get anything from doing a lot of practice work when the test comes along. The test's the test, and that counts for a lot, the grade.

Another aspect of the game is that the goal is not learning but grades, and since students' attendance at the university is, in principle, justified as a learning process, this division creates a degree of unease. Note, for example, how Gemma complains about the *'pràctiques'* in spite of the fact that she admits their value as a learning experience. In fact, all the respondents acknowledged a difference between what they did for classes--as part of the game--and what they learned on their own initiative. Interestingly, those who were more successful academically distinguished most clearly between these two aspects of their academic lives, and some felt particularly conflicted about this difference. Greg, the most successful OSU student,

[4] For legibility's sake, we illustrate the findings and discussion with the English translation of those interview excerpts which are originally in Catalan. In Appendix B we include the original excerpts.

for example, spent much of the quarter attempting to use his classes to advance what might be considered a self-imposed curriculum, instead of playing the game.

Excerpt 2

RESEARCHER: Right, why are you changing your system?

GREG: I'm changing my system because of a change in my attitude this year about what learning really is. It's a question that I've thought about for a long time [ ][5] I've looked at what is really learning and have come to the conclusion, and I've known this all along, but have kind of still gone on with the program that's normally accepted, have come to the conclusion that learning you know is what I make of it. Well, that's pretty bad.

RESEARCHER: ((laughs))

GREG: That's true though. I mean learning is what I make of it [ ] Just because I read something doesn't mean that I learn it. I've known that already, but now I'm gonna put it into practice, and I will be selective because just going through old notes, I realized that I've taken thousands of notes in college and high school, and paid attention in class, and when I look back and see what I actually remember from it, it's very very little, so I question "OK why put all that effort in? Is it useful? Is it important? Is it practical?" And, one of the results of these questions is that I'm going to try to be more efficient in the time that I have, in what I study, you know evaluating something. If it's not interesting to me, I might not read it, even though it's gonna be tested over. I'm gonna try my best not to let my education, my interests be manipulated by, you know, what is on the syllabus.

Lluis, like his American counterpart in academic success, displayed a carefully thought out ideology favoring the pursuit of learning over grades. He went so far as to take the words from an early 20th century Catalan novel (Pous i Pages, 1938) as his own motto about studying.

[5] The transcription conventions are included in Appendix A.

Excerpt 3

LLUIS: ((reading the book aloud)) The goal of his studies was not to get an academic degree to earn his living, but to have a strong command of the knowledge that the degree implies and to widen it later on with his own research

RESEARCHER: Why did you underline that?

LLUIS: Well, because I agree with it

His feelings regarding the primacy of the self-imposed curriculum were shared by some of his Catalan cohorts, though not all. In this case, he was joined by Francesc, who takes what may be an even more radical stance, and opposed by Jaume.

Excerpt 4

FRANCESC: I never think of the exam

JAUME: No, but you've got=

FRANCESC: =No, look, I was talking today with Maria and she was going "Wow, [professor's name's] classes have nothing to do with what's gonna be on the test." And I went like "Enjoy the class, and then we'll see."

JAUME: They're all like that. We're just here to pass, and when we get it, then we can say=

LLUIS: =Not me

JAUME: Of course that's your approach, but some people think it wouldn't matter whether they work hard or not

LLUIS: I don't think the point of studying Humanities is to get a pass

JAUME: No, let's not hide from reality. The reality is that, as long you pass, you think "I'm finished with it, and that's the end of it."

The less successful students, on the other hand, tended to be less consistent when distinguishing between the two sides of academic life, their responses were characterized by the lack of a clear separation between a self-imposed curriculum and the one required by the

syllabus. Neither Pilar nor Sophie proved able to enunciate any difference beyond an acknowledgment that there was one. Will made an attempt, when asked, but he was only able to produce this rather confused salad of ideas:

Excerpt 5

RESEARCHER: What does the grading system do, what is it for?

WILL: The grading system? In my opinion?

RESEARCHER: Yeah.

WILL: Well, I think it's to see who puts the effort into what. I think it's more about effort than anything else, and I think the people who have learned tricks that in turn increased their ability, maybe have learned a trick or a style of how to study things more specifically or know how to pick things out, "OK this will probably be on the test, this will probably be on the test," instead of studying it all. They have a little bit more of an advantage but you know I think that's what the grading system is for, to teach people how to do that, to be able to pick out the importance and you know skim over the less important. I think the grading system is basically to test effort and of course knowledge in a subject. I don't know if it's always accurate, I like to believe that it is for the most part accurate, but I don't know if it's always accurate. Let's see, I think, that is a pretty tough question. Like I say, I think it's mostly to grade knowledge and to grade effort, sometimes you can't always grade for both though, especially in a big class when you really don't know who's putting the effort in, I mean somebody that might be studying ten hours a day for that class could still end up doing poorly just because they have a hard time understanding that class.

This sort of confusion about the role of grading versus learning seemed to be associated with poor strategizing for the weaker students. In Pilar's case, it led to a self-destructive avoidance of techniques she actually profited from in personal reading when she read assignments. As was common with the weaker students at both sites, the basic error was to focus on more superficial responses.

Excerpt 6

PILAR With assigned readings I read fast to have enough time to finish them and then summarize them. While when I read for pleasure on my own, I take more time and I write more notes

When she read for pleasure, on the other hand, her written involvement was focused on higher order interpretative goals

Excerpt 7

PILAR Me, the notes I make are not references ((she is talking about reading for pleasure)) I mean, they don't refer to the book. I read something, and it brings an idea to mind. So I write down that idea. As for writing a summary, well I'll do it if the book I'm reading is for a special assignment that I need it to study. But if it's a book for outside, that I'm reading because I want to, then I don't do a summary, but I write the ideas that have come to me through the book

Differences in Reading and Writing

Pilar's response in Excerpt 7 also shows a major difference between the students in the two universities. The American students rarely, if at all, would write in response to assigned or other reading. None took notes from readings except for the production of papers, and even then a photocopier was a preferred form of information retrieval. Required readings were often left undone, particularly if students felt that the professor would only test them on material covered in the lecture. Carmin, for example, did not even buy her Theater textbook on the advice of friends who had taken the class the previous quarter and who had received A's without doing the reading. It proved to be a mistake, as she later acknowledged, but only because her grade was less than she would have liked. Greg also disposed of his Statistics textbook once he decided he could do without it, a move he also came to regret. Even when they did readings, the physical interaction consisted largely of underlining and highlighting, with occasional marginal notes and glosses. The bulk of studying was focused on lecture notes

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The Catalans, on the other hand, constantly interacted with texts through writing, through glosses in margins of books, outlines of readings, summaries, and notes. This interaction was typically recursive in nature, and it involved getting as much information as possible from a text.

Excerpt 8

GEMMA Here, for example, this was required reading in my third year of high school. So since I already knew that there was this jumping around of context, time, and characters, and everything, well, because of that I made these notes. Everything, names of characters, places, and I also see there are indicated here-either with brackets, underlining, sorts of circle things. Or when I liked a bit of description, or some other thing, well I underlined it. Here there's a character and then I madé a note here, for example, of the little brother, on account of the fact that a lot of the characters have the same last name, Rigau, so to remind myself of who was who, there wasn't anything else I could do.

Canonical Versus Utilitarian Valuations of Knowledge

These different responses may be related to the other major difference we found between the literacies of the two groups, one that relates to different valuations of knowledge. The more successful American students tended to have a contempt for factual knowledge and what they regarded as superficial reading. All expressed the belief that concepts and critical skills were of far greater value, and they often complained about the lack of emphasis on these higher order issues in their classes. Their attitude was quite graphically expressed in the frequent complaints about having to "spit back" or "regurgitate" information on exams that we heard over and over again from US undergraduates.

Catalan students, on the other hand, tended to see factual course material in terms of its place as a canonical knowledge base which they felt to be necessary accouterment of an educated person. Course work was seen as one important opportunity to acquire this knowledge which is validated in broader cultural terms. In particular, this belief appears to be

associated with the concept of 'sabiesa' ('sabiduria' in Spanish), an abstract noun derived from the verb "to know." A person is considered to be a 'sabi' if they 'saben molt' (literally, "know a lot") or have an extensive knowledge base. Such a person is an authentic expert in a field and in general is someone to be respected. This figure of 'sabi' is opposed to those of a 'pedant'--a person who brags about their knowledge, whether they have it or not--and a 'fantasma' (literally, "ghost"), colloquially an individual who puts on a phony front, in this case feigning the domination of an extensive knowledge base. As a result, the knowledge a person has and what they do with it is closely tied up with their personal integrity.

In the case of literature, this orientation towards knowledge frequently took the form of an obligation to read certain works and remember key details. Jaume's response to a question about why he tried to read *Don Quixote* was typical. In addition, it shows clearly the normative nature of Jaume's self-imposed curriculum. Although he evidently did not enjoy the novel, he was forcing himself to read *Don Quixote* because of a sense of social obligation.

Excerpt 9

JAUME: Me, this summer for example, I started *Don Quixote*. I was going along reading it, and I was like reading other books in between. And it's like the others I was like finishing, but that one I didn't. It's a book that I think it's good, and you should read it, but it's hard.

RESEARCHER: Why did you read it? Why did you want to read *Don Quixote*?

JAUME: Because I always ask people to recommend books to me. As for *Don Quixote*, it was a book that everybody talked about, and as they say it's a major work of literature. It's a long book, but in the summer I had time to read it.

Similarly, Lluis understood this canon in terms of a discreet universe of readings, and that not having read a book that belonged in that universe was, for him, a pending assignment in his self-imposed curriculum. Lluis, in fact, referred to *Don Quixote* "as a pending reading." He had other books which he put on a list.

Excerpt 10

LLUIS: The book (in this case, *Dangerous Liaisons*), is much better than the movie. I haven't read it, but I put it on the list.

RESEARCHER: Ah, you have a list and everything?

LLUIS: Yeah, like of my next readings. Some, I already got, but I have to find the time.

RESEARCHER: And you have it written out?

LLUIS: Yes.

Within this socially-defined concept of a self-imposed curriculum, the two most successful Catalan students, Lluis and Gemma, together with Francesc, saw the university's role as providing a base to what was seen as a life-long vocation. Gemma put it this way:

Excerpt 11

GEMMA: Precisely because you're interested, it's more practical for you to acquire some basic, quick, and practical knowledge. It's like a starting point that, since you like it, you'll expand later on you own.

Lluis shared the same understanding of the value of global knowledge, and so for him a good class was one that would be one that provided him with a panoramic perspective on each topic. He was unhappy with a literature course that focused on close readings of two major writers at the expense of other important works and authors.

Excerpt 12

RESEARCHER: On this subject, you guys know that during the four years that you're doing Humanities, you can't read everything there is, not even the most important things. Then, do you guys think that it's better if, for example, they have you read important sections of a lot of books, or that they make you read a few ones, but entirely?

LLUIS: Make lists. Like they tell you "Look, we have this book and now we'll read this piece, and we'll get in contact with it" and later another work that they think is

important, well that one too. But what they shouldn't happen is for you to take [course's title], and only study [two author's names], and whatever else. Accepting the problem with time, we shouldn't reduce it all to two works.

The relative advantages of a wide scope survey approach versus a close examination of a few texts was, interestingly enough, also a topic for fervent debate among faculty at the university.

For American students, on the other hand, a self-imposed curriculum typically revolved around the notion of usefulness. Carmin, for example, changed her major at mid-quarter, from Social Work to Physical Therapy, rendering her current classes irrelevant to her planned career. As a result, the course work only had a purpose to her in terms of maintaining her GPA. She would put in enough effort to get A's but no more.

Excerpt 13

CARMIN: A successful student is obviously someone who's gonna get the 'A,' and to know how much work personally you have to put into it, I think has a lot to do with it.

RESEARCHER: When you say knowing how much time to put into it, I was wondering if you meant how much time on a minimum level or how much time on a maximum level or both.

CARMIN: However much time you have to get an 'A.'

RESEARCHER: But not go overboard?

CARMIN: It depends what classes they are. If they were classes I was going to be using in the future, then I would spend more time actually knowing it, not trying to get the 'A.' The 'A' might not even be as important to me.

RESEARCHER: Do you have any of those classes this quarter?

CARMIN: None. They were until I decided to change my major.

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So powerful was the criterion of usefulness, that for some students the entire notion of learning depended on it, at least indirectly. For Sophie, information that was only to be used for an exam was not learned but only memorized.

Excerpt 14

RESEARCHER: But you didn't like Political Science.

SOPHIE: No, I hated it.

RESEARCHER: Why did you hate it? You hated it more than Chemistry?

SOPHIE: Uh hum, well I really hated them about the same ((laughs)). I hated Chemistry probably more than I did Poli-Sci.

RESEARCHER: Was Poli-Sci based on a lot of memorization also?

SOPHIE: Well, you had to remember. I don't really classify it in my mind as being memorization, I think that's what the difference is. I think that's more or less learning. Memorizing really isn't learning anything.

RESEARCHER: What is learning?

SOPHIE: Uhm, actually maintaining uhm things in your mind that they taught you. You know, I don't know if "maintaining" is the right word I want to use but uhm.

RESEARCHER: You say, "maintaining" isn't the right word? What do you do with something that it becomes learning rather than just memorizing?

SOPHIE: Well, I'll be able to uhm retain it, yeah I guess retain, my retention over poli-sci will be better than chemistry because I'll use that.

RESEARCHER: You'll use it, how?

SOPHIE: He says- he says- ((referring to the instructor))

RESEARCHER: Well, do you believe him?

SOPHIE: Only after the final, 'cause I really liked what we talked about, communism and all that stuff. It helps me understand what all they've gone through over there.

What is also interesting in this exchange is that the notion of utility is not as pragmatic as it would first appear. What really matters for Sophie, as the last line shows, is that she sees

the information as meaningful in terms of her understanding the world. Throughout the Political Science class, she complained about all the emphasis placed on Mexico, which was being used as a case study for the concepts that formed core material. However, neither the concepts nor the case did interest her. When the subject of communism came up, she became interested for reasons that were not clear to us. In any case, the criterion of usefulness appears to be really no more or less practical than the Catalans' canonical knowledge base. Sophie is, after all, unlikely to gain more from understanding "what they are going through over there" than she would from the insights about Mexico earlier in the quarter, or arguably those achieved in the Chemistry class. In this case at least, the employment of usefulness as a criterion appears likely be a post hoc justification or, at least, the result of a personal decision to employ the knowledge in the future. In this way, on a deeper level the Americans' self imposed curriculum appeared to differ from that of the Catalans in that the criteria seem more individualistic in origin, the information has to be of interest--for one reason or another--to the learner. For the Catalans, on the other hand, the value of the material was derived from a more social construction.

The contrast between the social/canonical orientation of the Catalans and the individualistic/useful one of the Americans is put into relief by the complaints each side tended to make. As we pointed out above, some Catalan students found it difficult to appreciate their *Pràctiques*, classes which were developed to help students with their writing skills. The Americans, on the other hand, expressed particular scorn for the General Education Curriculum, whose purpose was, at least in theory, to develop students as well-rounded individuals. Only Greg, who incidentally had spent his junior year in Germany, found some value in the GEC, at least in theory. However, he was hardly impressed with the way it was carried out. Sophie characteristically put her feelings quite bluntly:

Excerpt 15

SOPHIE: My GPA was better last year, much better than it was this year.

RESEARCHER: Why?

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SOPHIE I was taking Social Work courses, courses that I was really excited about, Sociology

RESEARCHER This year it's

SOPHIE =This crap

RESEARCHER GEC? ((which is OSU's General Education Curriculum))

SOPHIE Yeah. I'll be done with science after this quarter, period, done forever!

Perhaps the greater social engagement with knowledge on the part of the Catalans was also associated with a greater difficulty with reconciling their treatment of textual materials with the requirements of the game. It was as if the academization of this canonical knowledge devalued it to some extent, as it forced students to treat it in ways that clashed with their self-imposed curriculum. This problem was particularly acute for the weaker and average students who complained about the anxiety over studying that arose--as Gemma saw it--from the pressure of other demands, such as *Pràctiques*, competing for a limited amount of time.

Excerpt 16

GEMMA I've been forced to change the way I study. They don't let you study the way you want to

RESEARCHER How would you like to study?

GEMMA Well, I need more time to spend on something, or to spend more time on what I enjoy working on

RESEARCHER And you can't do that?

GEMMA The practical work is the most important work to do [ ] but when the exam comes they ask you for that other kind of work, or exercises, that you couldn't prepare as you wanted to, because there hasn't been enough time. On a personal level, of course, it's really good, but for me, it makes me worry a lot that I can't organize it in the way I want

While the Catalan students were willing to allow external factors to determine what knowledge was of value, they were, as this quote shows, quite resentful of interference in how they attained this knowledge. Pilar also had difficulty with the university requirements impeding her ability to study the way she wanted, and she also tended to blame the *Pràctiques*, almost creating an impression of existential confusion surrounding the notion of what constitutes studying.

Excerpt 17

PILAR: It gives you the impression that you don't study and that's it. You only do 'Pràctiques,' and I get the impression I don't study. I don't know, it's probably the way to study, but I don't know how.

The American students, more cynically perhaps, were willing to see what they saw first as useless requirements as "jumping through hoops," something they expected would not stop with graduation, and they did not particularly mind advice on how they were supposed to do so.

CONCLUSION

To sum up these results, at both sites academic literacy was understood as a game-like activity, one that is largely driven by the assessment process. Similarly, in both cases the demands of the game for information processing and displays clashed with the students' self-imposed curriculums, creating a good deal of dissatisfaction for them. Interestingly, the more academically successful the respondents, the more clearly they seemed to be able to articulate the differences between the game and what they considered their learning. Whatever teachers may think about students' lack of motivation, these students all expressed an interest in learning. Their negative feelings towards classes resulted typically from a clash between their value systems and those of the institution or instructor. Thus, there are two parallel curricula: a self-imposed one and an external one enforced through the game. When information is required

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but does not fit into either one of these curricula--as in the case of the Catalan 'Practiques'--it merits a special contempt on the part of students.

The students' behavior at the two sites differed, however, in several ways. For one thing, the groups differed radically in their approaches to written language. Catalans were more interactively engaged in reading and writing. The American students, on the other hand, tended to see readings as often redundant to lectures and, at most, they would highlight portions. The nature of the self-imposed curriculums also varied. In Catalonia, the students believed in a canon composed typically of facts and familiarity with key texts. In the U.S., an overtly utilitarian view prevailed, with the notion of canon (in either a progressive or traditionalist form) being dismissed out of hand.

The case study approach has uniquely allowed us to look at students' perceptions of their academic work in college, but it has the disadvantage of giving our study little breadth due to the low number of students who can participate. To ameliorate this deficiency we have plans to look at students from other years and other disciplines at both university sites. We hope, nevertheless, that the present findings contribute to the understanding of academic literacy as a social construction and of college students as active literacy agents.

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APPENDIX A

Transcription Conventions

[ ]	Part of a turn that has not been transcribed to shorten the excerpt
[ ]	Part of a turn that has not been transcribed for anonymity's sake, but information is given about its contents
=	No gap at all between two turns, an interruption
( )	Part of the transcript which was not clearly recorded
(( ))	Contextual information about the utterance
If-	False start

APPENDIX B

Original Interview Excerpts in Catalan

Excerpt 1

GEMMA: El treball practic va molt be i esta molt be, pero sempre tinc pendent al cap que hi ha un altre treball que es l'examen. No esta compensat pel fet que hagis fet moltes practiques a l'hora de l'examen. L'examen es l'examen i allo compta molt, els punts.

Excerpt 3

LLUIS: "El fi dels estudis segons ell no havia d'esser adquirir un titol academic per guanyar-se, en acabar, la vida, sino dominar els coneixements que el títol suposava i ampliar-los despres amb les propies investigacions."

RESEARCHER: I per que ho vas subratllar aixo?

LLUIS: Doncs, perque jo hi estava d'acord.

Excerpt 4

FRANCESC: Jo no penso mai en l'examen.

JAUME: No pero tens.

FRANCESC: =No, perque avui parlava amb la Maria i ella deia: "Ui, les classes d'en [nom de professor], per a l'examen no hi ha res!" I jo li deia: "Disfruta de les classes i despres ja veurem."

JAUME: Aixo tots. Perque clar, estem aqui per aprovar l'assignatura i quan la tinguem ja pots dir ara:

LLUIS: =Jo no.

JAUME: Es clar, es el teu concepte pero hi ha gent que dira: "A mi, mentre m'aprovin, que mes em dona si estic jo malalt=me o no?" Ara estas fent sis assignatures=

LLUIS: =No crec que Humanitats sigui aprovar l'assignatura.

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JAUME No, però no ens amaguem de la realitat La realitat és que tu penses que mentre aprovis aquesta assignatura, "me la trec de sobre i ja està "

Excerpt 6

PILAR Amb les lectures obligatòries llegeixo depressa per tenir prou temps com per acabar-les i després resumir-les Quan llegeixo per plaer, prenc més temps si escric més notes

Excerpt 7

PILAR Jo, les anotacions que faig, quan llegeixo per plaer, no són referents, o sigui, no fan referència al llibre Llegeixo una cosa i allò em porta al cap una altra idea Dones escric aquella altra idea [ ] Això (fer un resum) ho faig si el llibre que estic llegint és per a una assignatura especial que la necessito per estudiar Però si és un llibre apart, que me'l llegeixo perquè jo vull, dones no faig un resum del llibre, sinó que escric les idees que m'han sortit a partir d'aquell llibre

Excerpt 8

GEMMA Aquí, per exemple, aquesta era lectura obligatòria de tercer de BUP Llavors com que ja sabia que hi havia aquests salts de context, de temps, de personatges, i de tot, dones per això em vaig fer notes d'aquestes Tot el que eren era personatges, noms de lloc, que també veig que hi estan aquí assenyalats, dones o bé amb corxets o bé amb ratlles, com una mena de rodones O quan m'agradava un tros de descripció, o dones, alguna cosa ho vaig subratllar Aquí hi ha un personatge i llavors apunto aquí, per exemple, el germà petit, com que hi havia molts personatges amb el mateix cognom, Rigau, dones per enrecordar-me de qui era, i no hi ha cap cosa més

Excerpt 9

JAUME Jo, aquest estiu per exemple vaig començar el Quixot. L'anava llegint, i l'anava intercalant amb d'altres. I es que els altres me'ls acabava i aquest no. És un llibre que trobo que està bé, que s'ha de llegir, però costa molt.

RESEARCHER Per que te'l vas llegir? Per que te'l vas voler llegir el Quixot?

JAUME Es que jo sempre demano que em recomanin llibres [ ] El Quixot, doncs mira, va ser que tothom en parlava, i com que diuen que es un llibre essencial per a la literatura, doncs, es molt gros, però a l'estiu ja te'l pots llegir.

Excerpt 10

LLUIS El llibre està molt més bé que la pel·lícula. El llibre no me l'he llegit, però me'l vaig apuntar a la llista.

RESEARCHER Ah, tens un llista i tot?

LLUIS Sí, o sigui, de pròximes lectures. Alguns ja els tinc comprats, però he de trobar el moment.

RESEARCHER I la tens escrita?

LLUIS Sí.

Excerpt 11

GEMMA Precisament perque tens aquest interes, a tu t'es més practic obtenir uns coneixements basics, rapids i practics. Jo, partint d'això que ja t'agrada, ja ampliaràs.

Excerpt 12

RESEARCHER Seguint aquest plantejament, vosaltres sabeu que durant els quatre anys que estareu a Humanitats, no podreu llegir tot el que hi ha, ni el que es més important. Llavors, creieu que es millor que, per exemple, us facin llegir trossos clàus de moltes obres, o que us facin llegir poques obres però senceres?

LLUIS Fer llistats. O sigui que et diguessin, "Mira, tenim això i ara llegirem aquest trosset, i entrar en contacte amb ell", i després alguna obra que ells considerin claus, dones també. Però el que no pot ser és que faci [títol d'un curs] i només estudiis [noms de dos escriptors], i no sé si algun més. Sabent que hi ha un problema de temps, això no vol dir que s'hagi de reduir tot a dues obres.

Excerpt 16

GEMMA M'han canviat la manera d'estudiar. No et deixen estudiar com tu vols estudiar.

RESEARCHER Com voldries estudiar?

GEMMA Doncs, necessito més temps per dedicar-me a una cosa, o dedicar més temps a allò que m'agrada.

RESEARCHER I això no ho pots fer?

GEMMA El treball pràctic és el treball primordial a treballar [ ] Però a l'hora de l'examen et demanen aquell altre tipus d'estudi, d'exercici, que no te l'has pogut preparar molt bé, però almenys a mi m'angoixa molt que no em puc organitzar com a mi em va bé.

Excerpt 17

PILAR Et dona la impressió que no estudies, només 'practiques' i ja està. Només fas pràctiques i et dona la impressió que no estudio. No sé, a la millor és la manera d'estudiar i no en sé.